

WHY I BELIEVE THE NEW TESTAMENT IS HISTORICALLY RELIABLE

Gary Habermas

The credibility of Scripture is certainly a multifaceted issue. In this chapter, I will examine one specific angle—whether the New Testament is a historically reliable document. Topics such as precise textual issues, genre considerations, specific critical methodologies, scientific concerns, and the doctrine of inspiration are beyond the focus here.¹ Instead, I will examine several areas that indicate that the New Testament speaks accurately when it makes historical claims that can be checked. I will begin by assessing some conventional areas of consideration.

CUSTOMARY STRATEGIES

Typically, defenses of the reliability of the New Testament have emphasized several items: the superior manuscript numbers, early dating of these copies, as well as the authoritative authorship and dating of the original compositions. I will respond briefly to each, since they all still have an important part to play. Since these defenses have received much attention, however, I will only highlight a number of relevant issues.

Manuscript Evidence

To start, are we even able to ascertain whether the text of the Bible is that of the original authors? While this issue relates strictly to the reliability of the text rather than to the historicity of its contents, the issue is still important in the overall scheme of this discussion. Generally, several qualities enhance manuscript value, assisting textual scholars in arriving at the best reading of the original text. The strongest case is made when many manuscripts are available, as close in time to the original autographs as possible. Wide geographical distribution of the copies and their textual families are likewise crucial. Of course, having complete texts is essential.

In light of these criteria, the New Testament is the best attested work from the ancient world. First, it has by far the greatest number of existing manuscripts. Ancient classical works are attested to by very few full or partial manuscripts—usually less than ten. In comparison, over five thousand full or partial Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist. Thousands of additional texts exist in other languages, especially Latin. This overwhelming number of copies yields a much stronger base for establishing the original text.

Concerning the date between the original writing and the earliest copies, ancient classical works generally exhibit gaps of at least seven hundred years. The interval significantly lengthens to twice this amount (or longer) with certain works by a number of key writers such as Plato and Aristotle. In contrast, the Bodmer and Chester Beatty Papyri contain most of the New Testament, dating about 100-150 years later than the New Testament, using an approximate date of A.D. 100 for its completion. The Codex Sinaiticus is a complete copy of the New Testament, while the Codex Vaticanus is a nearly complete manuscript, both dating roughly 250 years after the originals. These small gaps help to ensure the accuracy of the New Testament text.

Further, significant portions of some ancient works are missing. For example, 107 of Livy's 142 books of Roman history have been lost. Of Tacitus's original Histories and Annals, only approximately half remain.

The fact that there is outstanding manuscript evidence for the New Testament documents is even admitted by critical scholars.² John A.T. Robinson succinctly explains, "The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world."³ Even Helmut Koester summarizes:

Classical authors are often represented by but one surviving manuscript; if there are half a dozen or more, one can speak of a rather advantageous situation for reconstructing the text. But there are nearly five thousand manuscripts of the NT in Greek... The only surviving manuscripts of classical authors often come from the Middle Ages, but the manuscript tradition of the NT begins as early as the end of II CE; it is therefore separated by only a century or so from the time at which the autographs were written. Thus it seems that NT textual criticism possesses a base which is far more advantageous than that for the textual criticism of classical authors.⁴

The result of all this is an incredibly accurate New Testament text. John Wenham asks why it is that, in spite of the "great diversity" in our copies, the texts are still relatively homogeneous. He responds, "The only satisfactory answer seems to be that its homogeneity stems from an exceedingly early text-virtually, that is, from the autographs."⁵ The resulting text is 99.99 percent accurate, and the remaining questions do not affect any area of cardinal Christian doctrine.⁶

Authorship and Date

The above described quality of manuscript data shows that the New Testament manuscripts were careful copies of what the original authors produced. However, this does not necessarily guarantee that the contents of these writings are historically accurate. The traditional strategy has been to argue that the Gospels and Acts were written by eyewitnesses, or those writing under their influence, thereby ensuring as much as possible the factual content. A somewhat more cautious position is that these five books were at least influenced by eyewitness testimony.⁷

Evangelical scholars often date each of the synoptic Gospels ten or so years earlier than their critical counterparts, who usually prefer dates of roughly A.D. 65-90. There is widespread agreement on placing John at roughly A.D. 95. This places the writing of the manuscripts thirty-five to sixty-five years after the death of Jesus, close enough to allow for accurate accounts.

Perhaps the most promising way to support the traditional approach is to argue backward from the Book of Acts. Most of this book is occupied with the ministries of Peter and Paul, and much of the action centers in the city of Jerusalem. The martyrdoms of Stephen (7:54-60) and the apostle James (12:1-2) are recorded, and the book concludes with Paul under arrest in Rome (28:14-31). Yet Acts says nothing concerning the deaths of Paul and Peter (mid-60s A.D.) or James, Jesus' brother (about A.D. 62). Moreover, accounts of the Jewish War with the Romans (beginning in A.D. 66) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) are also strangely absent. Further, the book ends enigmatically with Paul under house arrest, without any resolution to the situation.

How could the author of Acts not mention these events or resolve Paul's dilemma, each of which is centrally related to the text's crucial themes? These events would even seem to dwarf many of the other recorded occurrences.⁸ It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the author did not record these items simply because they had not yet occurred. These omissions argue persuasively for an early date for the composition of Acts, before the mid-60s A.D.

If it is held that Luke was written prior to Acts but after Mark and Matthew, as perhaps most critical scholars do, then all five books may be dated before A.D. 65. It is simply amazing that Acts could be dated A.D. 80-85 and the author not be aware of, or otherwise neglect to mention, any of these events.⁹

Additional Support

Extra-biblical sources are another avenue worth pursuing when determining whether the New Testament texts speak reliably concerning historical issues. While less frequently used by

scholars, a number of ancient secular sources mention various aspects of Jesus' life, corroborating the picture presented by the Gospels.¹⁰ The writers of these sources include ancient historians such as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Thallus. Jewish sources such as Josephus and the Talmud add to our knowledge. Government officials such as Pliny the Younger and even Roman Caesars Trajan and Hadrian describe early Christian beliefs and practices. Greek historian and satirist Lucian and Syrian Mara Bar-Serapion provide other details. Several nonorthodox, Gnostic writings speak about Jesus in a more theological manner.¹¹

Overall, at least seventeen non-Christian writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the earliest church. Most frequently reported is Jesus' death, mentioned by twelve sources. Dated approximately 20 to 150 years after Jesus' death, these secular sources are quite early by the standards of ancient historiography.

Altogether, these non-Christian sources mention that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, performed miracles, led disciples, and that many thought he was deity. These sources call him a good teacher or a philosopher and state that his message included conversion, denial of the gods, fellowship, and immortality. Further, they claim he was crucified for blasphemy but rose from the dead¹² and appeared to his disciples, who were themselves transformed into bold preachers.

A number of early Christian sources also report numerous details concerning the historical Jesus. Some, such as the writings of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp, date from A.D. 95-110, or just ten years after the last New Testament book.¹³

Information of a different sort can be derived from archaeological artifacts. While few provide direct confirmation of Jesus, they do provide helpful background information. Places such as the Bethesda and Siloam pools, the foundations of Herod's temple, possible locations of Pilate's Praetorium, and the general vicinity of Golgotha and the Garden tomb all enlighten modern readers. Much information has been gained about ancient Jewish social customs, and many details have been revealed concerning the cities, towns, coinage, commerce, and languages of first-century Palestine.¹⁴ A.N. Sherwin-White has furnished a remarkable amount of background information corroborating many details of the trial of Jesus, as well as other legal scenes in the New Testament.¹⁵

In a few cases, more specific data is available. For example, the Latin inscription "Titulus Venetus" helps to illumine Augustus's census. A Latin plaque mentions "Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judaea." The bones of a first-century A.D. crucifixion victim, Yohanan, tell us much about the gruesome spectacle of crucifixion. The Nazareth Decree, perhaps circulated by Emperor Claudius between A.D. 41 and 54, threatens tomb robbers with death.¹⁶

In summary, those who use traditional strategies to support the historical reliability of the New Testament assert that superior manuscript evidence shows we have essentially what the authors wrote. By linking closely the authors and composition dates to the events themselves, it is argued that the writers were in the best position to know what actually occurred. Additional data are provided by extra-biblical and archaeological sources, showing that, when these details are checked, the New Testament fares well.

A surprising amount of traditional data corroborates the life and teachings of Jesus. Many questions remain, to be sure, but the available evidence indicates that believers are on strong ground when reporting the general reliability of the New Testament reports of the historical Jesus.

RECENT STRATEGIES

Scholarship in recent years, however, has moved in other directions. While not necessarily denying the traditional arguments just discussed, scholars are frequently less interested in the question of the New Testament's reliability. Nonetheless, among the contemporary tendencies to which critics gravitate, there are still many gems to be mined-treasures that point in additional ways to the historical trustworthiness of the New Testament. Some of the prizes turn out to be powerful tools. Four such approaches are outlined below.

Critical Rules

The trend among recent critical scholars is not to accept the reliability of the Gospels in a wholesale manner. Rather, the tendency is to apply certain analytical principles to ascertain which individual texts or portions of texts have the greatest likelihood of being historically accurate. In so doing, these biblical scholars are following the trend set by historians in their own examination of ancient texts.¹⁷ Following is a brief inventory of some of the rules that apply to written sources.

(1) Early evidence is strongly preferred, and in reference to Jesus, data from A.D. 30 to 50 would be exemplary.¹⁸ If these sources can be drawn from (2) the accounts of eyewitnesses to the occurrences, this would provide two of the strongest evidences possible. Historian David Hackett Fischer dubs this last criterion "the rule of immediacy" and terms it "the best relevant evidence."¹⁹

(3) Independent attestation by more than one source significantly strengthens a factual claim from antiquity. As historian Paul Maier notes, "Many facts from antiquity rest on just one ancient source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable."²⁰ Even the highly skeptical Jesus Seminar emphasizes items "attested in two or more independent sources."²⁰

Some details are enhanced by additional criteria. (4) The principle of embarrassment, negative report, or surprise reveals disparaging remarks made by the author about himself, another person, or event toward which the author is friendly and has a vested interest.²² (5) Precisely the opposite can also provide a different sort of evidence: when an antagonistic source agrees about a person or event when it is not in the source's best interests to do so. Maier even thinks that "such positive evidence within a hostile source is the strongest kind of evidence... If Cicero, who despised Catiline, admitted that the fellow had one good quality-courage-among a host of bad ones then the historian correctly concludes that Catiline was at least courageous."²³

(6) A skeptical criterion of historicity is that of dissimilarity or discontinuity. A saying, for instance, can be attributed to a person only if it cannot be plausibly attributed to other contemporary sources. In the case of Jesus, the chief issue is whether a Gospel teaching can be ascribed to either Jewish thought or to the early church. Historian Michael Grant calls this the "principal valid method of research."²⁴

(7) Another criterion specifically applied to Gospel studies is the presence of Aramaic words, substrata, or other indications of a Palestinian origin. Such conditions are thought to bring us closer to Jesus' teachings.²⁵

An overall test is (8) coherence. Does an event or teaching fit well with what is known concerning other surrounding occurrences and teachings?²⁶ Even better, does the proposed event illuminate other known incidents, thereby making them more intelligible?

Certainly one of the strongest methodological indications of historicity occurs when (9) a case can be built on accepted data that are recognized as well established by a wide range of otherwise

diverse historians. Historian Christopher Blake refers to this as the "very considerable part of history which is acceptable to the community of professional historians."²⁷

Combining a number of these critical rules of evidence, I propose what I call the "minimal facts" historical method, using precisely those data that satisfy at least two major standards. (1) Each event must be exceptionally well attested on several grounds, as indicated by criteria such as those listed above, and (2) the events must be admitted as historical by the vast majority of scholars who treat this specific topic. Of these two tests, the first one (strong confirmation for multiple reasons) is clearly the most significant. In chapter 7, we viewed Jesus' miracles and his resurrection in light of these criteria.²⁸

Other historical rules could be mentioned,²⁹ but those described above are sufficient for our current purposes. The functional value of critically applied rules such as these can be seen in many contemporary studies. They are often the decisive tests that are applied to the Gospel accounts in order to derive much of the basis for what is perhaps the major emphasis of current New Testament scholars today, the study of the historical Jesus. Other considerations may also be employed,³⁰ some of which will be pursued below, as we attempt to build a case for the historicity of the New Testament.

The Gospels and Ancient Historiography

A second trend among a few scholars today is to defend the Gospels based on standards derived from ancient historiography. Both because the study of the historical Jesus is so prominent today and because too many analyses simply miss the benefits of such a comparison,³¹ I will devote a little more room to this discussion, but from a historical perspective only.

R.T. France takes this approach regarding the authorship of the Gospels. While he thinks a plausible case can be made for the traditional writers, he suggests a different tack. He contends that "authorship... is not a major factor in our assessment of the reliability of the gospels."³² France insists that we evaluate the Gospels by the same criteria that are used in studying ancient writings. Not only are the Gospels the earliest sources for Jesus, but the nature of the tradition behind them should cause us to treat them seriously.³³

Some scholars still approach the Gospels in terms of authorship,³⁴ but France's point is noteworthy. Rather than view the Gospels as largely nonhistorical, religious propaganda, as do some critics, ancient historians and classical scholars often treat the Gospels quite seriously. These writings are frequently viewed as important sources for information concerning Jesus, opposing the more radical versions of criticism encouraged by some contemporary New Testament scholars. In fact, ancient historians regularly detect an adequate basis for historical data, especially in the Gospels. Roman historian Sherwin-White leveled the following accusation at modern biblical scholarship:

So, it is astonishing that while Greco-Roman historians have been growing in confidence, the twentieth-century study of the Gospel narratives, starting from no less promising material, has taken so gloomy a turn in the development of form-criticism... that the historical Christ is unknowable and the history of his mission cannot be written. This seems very curious.³⁵

Although the reference to form criticism is a bit outdated, Sherwin-White's chief point is clear. Because the Gospel narratives are "no less promising" than Greco-Roman sources, the same standards commonly applied to ancient non-religious history can also be applied to the New Testament records. The result yields a significant amount of factual content.

Michael Grant is another ancient historian who reaches similar conclusions. By employing normal historical techniques in regard to the New Testament, he concluded that much can be known about the historical Jesus.³⁶ Grant specifically rejects the methodology of radical theologians who insist that the New Testament is guilty until it is proven innocent, since "that also is too extreme a viewpoint and would not be applied in other fields."³⁷ The key, therefore, is the application of the same historiographical principles to both the Gospels and ancient documents.

At this point, critics often raise two major objections to the comparison of the New Testament writings to ancient Greco-Roman sources. (1) The Gospels contain many reports of supernatural events, which militates against their claim to be historical documents. (2) Further, the Gospels cannot be compared to ancient, nonreligious writings, since the latter recorded history while the former were written by authors whose religious doctrines significantly colored their perspectives. In short, we are told that the Gospels are of a different genre. The writers were not as concerned with discerning history as with relating miracles and composing religious propaganda written for the purpose of indoctrination. Regarding the charge of miraculous claims, the critic is simply mistaken to separate the Gospels from ancient historical documents. Ancient histories regularly recounted supernatural reports of all sorts, including omens and portents, prophecies, healing miracles, various sorts of divine interventions, as well as demonic activity. Examples are literally too numerous to miss. For instance, in his widely recognized account of Alexander the Great, Plutarch begins by noting Alexander's likely descent from Hercules. Later he tells how the gods favored and assisted Alexander in his battles and how Alexander talked with a priest who claimed to be the son of the god Ammon and then with Ammon himself. Near the end of his life, Alexander took almost every unusual event to be supernatural, surrounding himself with diviners and others who foretold the future.³⁸

But such is quite normal fare in ancient historical writings. Tacitus reports worship of the caesars, even by the Roman Senate, and that people saw normal occurrences such as crop failure as omens.³⁹ Suetonius provides a wider range of examples, including the working of fate, sightings of spirits and ghosts of deceased emperors, prayers to the gods, prophecies, rulers who read horoscopes and animal entrails, as well as an entire host of omens and portents manifest in comets, lightning, dreams, and even birds. Strangely, some of the caesars, convinced by signs that their death was imminent, awaited their demise in a dire state of mind.⁴⁰ It is true that these ancient writers may have at times simply recorded what certain people believed or thought they saw. In fact, on occasion they questioned whether certain occurrences were truly supernatural.⁴¹ But there can be no doubt that at other times these same writers clearly accepted the supernatural reports.⁴²

These examples are sufficient to assist us in reaching a verdict regarding the supernatural reports in ancient histories. These reports do not keep us from proclaiming their texts to be reliable historical accounts, as modern historians explicitly recognize.⁴³ So why should the Gospels be treated far more severely for the same reasons, especially when they report the supernatural perhaps even less commonly?

Another objection might also be raised here. Why should any ancient report of supernatural activity be accepted today? This question involves several philosophical issues, as well as the subject of historical evidence.⁴⁴ We are justified in rejecting the Greco-Roman supernatural claims precisely because they are not accompanied by a sufficient amount of evidence. On the other hand, many New Testament miracles, and the resurrection of Jesus in particular, are surrounded by exceptional evidence. Even critical scholars such as those in the Jesus Seminar think that the best data indicate that Jesus performed healings of some sort. Marcus Borg concedes that there are some "very strong" historical reasons that favor this conclusion. But can truly supernatural events be excluded? Borg thinks that we cannot rule them out.⁴⁵ (See chapter 7, which discusses Jesus' miracles and resurrection in detail.)

What about the second charge, that religious purposes kept the Gospel authors from recording history? Numerous responses to this complaint are found in the writings of A.N. Sherwin-White, Michael Grant, and other historians.⁴⁶ (1) Several prominent writers in antiquity composed works with purposes fairly similar to the intent exhibited in the Gospels. One example is Plutarch, who even declared that "my design was not to write histories, but lives."⁴⁷ Grant explains that the Gospel authors "would have applauded" many of these ancient efforts. The secular sources are still well recognized as historical, so why should the Gospels not be treated similarly?⁴⁸

(2) The sort of thoroughgoing propaganda literature that some critics believe the Gospels to be was actually nonexistent in ancient times. Sherwin-White declares, "We are not acquainted with this type of writing in ancient historiography."⁴⁹

(3) The Gospels are dated a maximum of several decades after the life of Jesus, while other ancient authors often recount events that took place even centuries earlier. For instance, Livy comments on Rome's beginnings by relating accounts from hundreds of years before his time.⁵⁰ Plutarch, too, writes extensively about persons who lived centuries before him.⁵¹ But modern historians are able to reconstruct the ancient past, even in cases in which their sources report events that are vastly earlier.

(4) Critics sometimes point out what they believe are discrepancies in the Gospels that undermine their claim to historicity. From one angle, each case could be examined on its own grounds.⁵² Yet, ancient histories sometimes "disagree amongst themselves in the widest possible fashion," but this fails to deter the modern scholar from reconstructing the past.⁵³ In answering the same question about the Gospels, Maier states, "The earliest sources telling of the great fire of Rome, for example, offer far more serious conflicts... Yet the fire itself is historical: it really happened."⁵⁴

(5) Contemporary theologians are too often satisfied simply to discuss the religious experiences of the earliest Christians, as if this were an end in itself. However, historians pursue adequate causes behind these experiences.⁵⁵

(6) One New Testament writing that has been confirmed by surprising amounts of external data is the Book of Acts. As Sherwin-White argues, "For Acts the confirmation of history is overwhelming." Although he thinks that Acts is no less given to propaganda than the Gospels, Sherwin-White still concludes that "any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted."⁵⁶

(7) Even if radical criticism is applied to the Gospels, this still should not thwart the discovery of much historical data in these works. Although the Gospel writers' primary concern may have been theological in nature, it does not automatically follow that they would thereby have been unable to preserve the relevant historical facts in the process. Theological or moralizing motives can coexist with the reporting of facts.⁵⁷

For many reasons, then, historians see a number of weaknesses in the critical methodology that is so popular with certain contemporary theologians. In sum, if the same criteria that are regularly applied to other ancient writings are also implemented by New Testament scholars, a solid historical basis emerges for the life and teachings of Jesus.⁵⁸

However, it is far from the case that all New Testament scholars have adopted the stance of radical criticism. A.M. Hunter maintains that there are several reasons for believing that the Gospel presentation of Jesus is essentially reliable. (1) The earliest believers were Jews who were very careful about faith, fully preserving the initial traditions of Jesus' life and teachings; (2) the Gospel authors were "in a position to know the facts about Jesus"; (3) Jesus taught in such a manner that his teachings could be more easily remembered; (4) all four Gospels correctly reflect

the first-century Palestinian milieu; and (5) in spite of differences, the same portrait of Jesus emerges from each of the four Gospels.⁵⁹

By applying the same methods to the Gospels that are applied to other ancient documents, then, scholars have shown that these four volumes provide accurate depictions of Jesus' life.⁶⁰

The Writings and Thoughts of the Apostle Paul

At present, next to the historical Jesus, perhaps the most popular New Testament area of research is the writings and thoughts of the apostle Paul. Due to the exceptionally high respect given to Paul by critical scholars, his epistles are therefore one of the best ways to approach aspects of the historicity of Jesus and the reliability of the New Testament.

The majority of critical scholars question or reject a few of the epistles that bear Paul's name—usually some of the prison and/or pastoral epistles.⁶¹ But Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians are rarely questioned, even by skeptics, and 1 Thessalonians and Philemon are widely respected. At least the first five, and often the last two, belong to the corpus that recent scholars refer to as Paul's "undisputed letters."⁶² In spite of his critical approach, Helmut Koester states that all seven books are "generally accepted as genuine without doubt."⁶³ Even G.A. Wells acknowledges that a group of writings is unanimously considered Pauline, while personally admitting as genuine eight of Paul's epistles—the above seven plus Colossians.⁶⁴

Therefore, scholars can trace historical paths from Paul's accepted epistles to the historicity of Jesus or early Christian beliefs. What might such approaches look like? Three are described below.

One route is to list the historical data about Jesus—both the events of his life and his teachings—that are specifically found in Paul's accepted epistles. Jesus was born as a Jew (Gal. 3: 16) from the family of David (Rom. 1:3) and lived under Jewish law (Gal. 4:4). Jesus had brothers (1 Cor. 9:5), one of whom was James (1 Cor. 15:7), as well as twelve disciples (1 Cor. 15:7). Paul knew that at least some of Jesus' brothers and apostles had wives (1 Cor. 9:5). In fact, Paul knew personally James, as well as apostles Peter and John, having spent time with at least the first two on more than one occasion (Gal. 1:18-2:16).

Paul also relates a few personal qualities about Jesus. He was poor (2 Cor. 8:9),⁶⁵ a servant who acted with humility (Phil. 2:5,7-8), meekness, and gentleness (2 Cor. 10:1). Though he did not act on his own behalf, he was still abused by others (Rom. 15:3). Further, Paul also knew a number of Jesus' teachings and encouraged believers to obey them. This is clearly indicated when he specifically refers to Jesus' words (1 Cor. 7:10; 9:14; 11:23-25). A number of times, his point seems to be taken from one of Jesus' sayings in the Gospels. Some of these instances include the topics of divorce and remarriage (1 Cor. 7:10-11), ministers being paid wages (1 Cor. 9:14), paying taxes (Rom. 13:6-7), the duty to love our neighbors as we do ourselves (Rom. 13:9), and ceremonial cleanliness (Rom. 14:14). On topics such as women, the treatment of sinners, and society's outcasts, Paul also seems to have been aware of Jesus' attitudes and teaching. His assertions about specific titles reflecting Jesus' deity are another important area for comparison with Jesus' own teachings (Rom. 1:3-4; 10:9). Paul so encourages believers to be vigilant in light of Jesus' second coming (1 Thess. 4:15), which would happen like the thief that comes in the night (1 Thess. 5:2-11).

Paul provides the most details concerning the last week of Jesus' life, speaking frequently of these events due to their centrality to the gospel. He gives particulars concerning the Lord's Supper, even citing the words Jesus spoke on this occasion (1 Cor. 11:23-25). Paul speaks often of Jesus' death (Rom. 4:25; 5:8), specifying crucifixion (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20) and mentioning Jewish instigation (1 Thess. 2:14-15). He tells how Jesus was buried, rose again three days later,

and appeared to numerous people, both individually and in groups (1 Cor. 15:3-8). He is now at God's right hand (Ram. 8:34).⁶⁶

Paul's recognized epistles, as accredited sources, provide a rough outline of Jesus' life and teachings. When Paul's authorship is granted to other epistles, we gain additional sources from which we can draw information.⁶⁷

Another direction is provided by C.H. Dodd, who argued forcefully that "a comparison, then, of the Pauline epistles with the speeches in Acts leads to a fairly clear and certain outline sketch of the preaching of the apostles."⁶⁸ As such, critical investigation can establish the "essential elements" of "apostolic Preaching" [sic] back to an early date.⁶⁹

A somewhat similar but more radical approach is taken by New Testament historian Paul Barnett. Totally apart from the Gospels and Acts, he argues that we can gain an understanding of the earliest apostolic activity before and after Easter from Paul's epistles alone. Suffice it to say, he outlines such a case, arguing from "passing references in Paul's letters" to "our earliest window" of primitive apostolic teachings, soon after Jesus' ministry.⁷⁰

In all three of these approaches, Paul's writings provide the primary historical groundwork from which we may reconstruct the central portions and the overall contours of the early Christian message.

Critics seldom provide any additional grounds for their positive approach to Paul, apparently thinking that this is unnecessary. But such reasons are not difficult to find. In the earliest period after the close of the New Testament canon, at the end of the first century, at least three writers knew his books well. Clement of Rome (c. A.D. 95-96), Ignatius (c. A.D. 107), and Polycarp (c. A.D. 110) quote or otherwise refer to statements in twelve of the thirteen letters traditionally attributed to Paul. Only Philemon is exempted, probably because of its brief, nontheological nature. The other twelve epistles are cited almost ninety times! Of this total, 1 Corinthians is mentioned over thirty times, the most referenced of Paul's letters from this early date.⁷¹ Clement testifies to the early belief in the authenticity and inspiration of Paul's first letter to Corinth: "Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle." In it, Paul spoke "in the Spirit."

Very rarely do even skeptics doubt the Pauline authorship of this work. In fact, we could hardly hope for more critical consensus. Not even G.A. Wells protests the authorship of 1 Corinthians, including it among those texts that "are universally accepted as genuinely Pauline."⁷² Scholars are equally agreed on the approximate date of 1 Corinthians. Paul first visited the city of Corinth roughly A.D. 51-52 (cf. Acts 18:1-18). His first epistle to them was written between 53 and 57,⁷³ approximately twenty-five years after Jesus' death.⁷⁴

We are on solid critical ground, therefore, in accepting 1 Corinthians as the apostle Paul's work, dating from a comparatively short time after Jesus' death. On matters concerning the historical Jesus, Paul was an authoritative source, an eyewitness who was close to the data he records.

Creds or Traditions

What was the content of the earliest apostolic preaching before the first New Testament book was written? The vast majority of people in the first-century Mediterranean world were illiterate, so it was necessary for them to learn orally.⁷⁵ This requirement meant that the easiest way for the central elements of a message to be remembered long after they were heard was for them to be presented in a brief, easily retainable manner.

In the New Testament, we find numerous statements that actually predate the texts in which they are embedded. These creds or traditions are often concise, catchy sayings that are packed with

meaning in a minimal number of words. They provide the clearest examples of the apostolic teaching that occurred in the earliest years after Jesus' death but prior to the first canonical writings. As such, this is one of the most important, as well as most exciting, topics in New Testament studies.⁷⁶ Scholars have pointed out several textual indicators that these creeds are present.⁷⁷

The clearest indication of a creedal statement occurs when a writer specifically tells us that he is passing on such a tradition. The best example is Paul, who distinctly states on various occasions that he is repeating teachings or traditions, sometimes explaining that they have been given to him by others.⁷⁸ Other indicators include the presence of a stylistic rhythm, a repetitive word pattern that shows up elsewhere in the New Testament, a different syntactical configuration from the immediate context, the inclusion of vocabulary or style that are not the author's normal speech patterns, along with the presentation of a fairly simple, unevolved theology.⁷⁹

In these early creedal statements, we find numerous reports about Jesus. He was born in the lineage of David, came from the town of Nazareth, was preceded by John the Baptist, had twelve disciples, preached, performed miracles, and fulfilled Old Testament Scripture. Several other details are narrated concerning the Last Supper, Jesus' appearance before Pilate, and the confession he gave before this Roman ruler. Multiple creeds also report that Jesus was crucified and died in Jerusalem and was buried. But he was resurrected three days later and appeared to many of his followers, both individually as well as in groups. Later, he ascended to heaven and was glorified. His miracles and especially his resurrection showed that God vindicated him along with his message, and many believed in him. These early confessions also ascribe to Jesus the titles of deity, such as Son of God, Lord, Christ or Messiah, and Savior.⁸⁰

The value of these creedal statements can hardly be overestimated. Not only do they report significant aspects regarding Jesus' life, but they do so from an exceptionally early time period that is very close in date to the events themselves. Perhaps even more crucial, they reflect the preaching and teaching of those who were closest to Jesus, from the earliest period of the church. While a number of these traditions are reported by Paul, many others are not. These latter examples fill in even more details concerning Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

This chapter reveals that the New Testament fares exceptionally well in terms of its historical reliability, actually exceeding what is often expected of an ancient text. We have in the New Testament essentially what the authors originally penned, and the texts have been confirmed time and again by various means. Tough questions will always have to be addressed, but we have a highly evidenced document from which to proceed.

¹Some of these subjects are addressed in other chapters, such as those by Walter Bradley and Winfried Corduan.

²For information on New Testament manuscript evidence, see John A.T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 33-38; F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 16-18; Henri Daniel-Rops, ed., *The Sources for the Life of Christ* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962), chap. 4 (by Daniel-Rops), 41-42.

³Robinson, *Can We Trust?* 36. Atheist Antony Flew agrees in Gary R. Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 66.

⁴Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), vol. 2, 16-17. Koester goes on to explain that this manuscript "richness" and "wealth" even raises difficulties not encountered in the classics, regarding families of manuscripts, their derivation, and readings.

⁵John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 180.

⁶Ibid., 186-88.

⁷In recent decades, a number of scholars have supported some of these options for the authorship of the Gospels and Acts. For example, see John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 181-82, 191, 196-97; R.A. Cole, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 28-50; Robert Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); C. Stewart Petrie, "The Authorship of 'The Gospel according to Matthew': A Reconsideration of the External Evidence," *New Testament Studies* 14, no. 1 (October 1967): 15-33; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 15-22; E. J. Tinsley, *The Gospel recording to Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965), 2-4; Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco: Word, 1972), 8-10; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), vol. 1, chap. 7; Raymond E. Brown, *New Testament Essays* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965), 129-31; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 8-35; R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 11-20; F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 19; Robinson, *Can We Trust? 71-94*; Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, chap. 4; Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1986); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 43-53, 81-84, 113-25, 252-83.

⁸This is not an argument from silence, in light of the similar items (in both content and geography) that the author does record.

⁹See Robinson, *Can We Trust? 71-73*; Gundry, *Matthew*, on the date of Matthew; Craig Blomberg, "The Historical Reliability of the New Testament," in *Reasonable Faith*, ed. William Lane Craig (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 206.

¹⁰While it is true that secular references to Jesus are generally brief and sometimes derived from Christian sources, it does not follow that they should be largely ignored, as is often their fate.

¹¹For specific details, see Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO.: College Press, 1996), esp. chap. 9. Compare R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1986); F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Edwin Yamauchi, "Jesus outside the New Testament: What Is the Evidence?" in *Jesus under Fire*, ed. Michael Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹²For details, see Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, chap. 11.

¹³See J.B. Lightfoot, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1891, 1956). A discussion of these and other early sources can be found in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, chap. 10.

¹⁴France, *Evidence for Jesus*, chap. 4; Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, chap. 8.

¹⁵A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1963; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). ¹⁶Habermas, *Historical Jesus*, chap. 8.

¹⁷A notable examination of this entire topic is C. Behan McCullagh's *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984), esp. 17-33. Other historical texts will be listed below.

¹⁸This time frame is emphasized by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 25-26.

¹⁹David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 62. Fischer includes here an event's archaeological "remains," placing this even above "direct observations." On the import of eyewitnesses in ancient Greek writing, see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 38-39.

²⁰Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 197.

²¹Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *Five Gospels*, 26.

²²Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1977; Collier Books Edition, 1992), 202-3. Cf. *ibid.*, 23.

²³Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, 198-99.

²⁴Grant, *Jesus*, 202.

²⁵Perhaps no one has done more on this subject than Joachim Jeremias. For example, see his famous work on the term *abba* in *The Central Message of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 9-30; also *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972), 100-114; cf. Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 37-41.

²⁶Cf. W. B. Gallie, "Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences," in *Theories of History: Readings from Classical and Contemporary Sources*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 397-98; the idea in critical New Testament research is pursued in Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 43-45.

²⁷Christopher Blake, "Can History Be Objective?" in *Theories of History*, 331.

²⁸I employ this twofold test in all my publications on Jesus' resurrection. For example, see *Historical Jesus*, 158-67; and *Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980; Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 24-26, 38-41.

²⁹For instance, some propose the presence of plural forms—an item is more likely to be historical if it is found in more than one literary pattern. Grant judges that this is "not very decisive" (*Jesus*, 201). We will also look below at a major indication of early material—the presence of creeds or traditions in the New Testament.

³⁰Again, the scope of this inquiry requires us to exclude from discussion a number of relevant details, especially regarding ancient historiography, such as those mentioned by Lucian of Samosata in *How to Write History* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1959), esp. 7-15. Breisach includes other items on pages 64, 68-69, 72.

³¹I will say very little concerning the literary aspects of this issue, involving, for example, an examination of the Gospel's genre as biography, history, or novel. For an overview, see L.W. Hurtado, "Gospel (Genre)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scott McNight, and I. H. Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1992).

³²France, *Evidence for Jesus*, 124.

³³*Ibid.*, 122-25.

³⁴See some of the more recent scholars in note 7 above.

³⁵Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 187.

³⁶Grant, *Jesus*, 199-200; cf. also 176.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 201.

³⁸Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (Dryden translation), *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica and University of Chicago, 1952), see 541, 553, 565, 575-76.

³⁹For some instances, see Tacitus, *Annals*, 1:11, 19, 28, 42, 55; 12:43; 14:22; *History*, 5:13.

⁴⁰Examples can be found in Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1957): Julius Caesar, 88; Augustus, 100; Tiberius, 74-75; Gaius Caligula, 57, 59; Claudius, 45-46; Nero, 56; Vespasian, 4, 25; Titus, 10; Domitian, 23.

⁴¹Plutarch, *Lives*, 5 75-76; Tacitus, *Annals*, 1:28; Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*: Nero, 56, Vespasian, 4.

⁴²For some examples, see Plutarch, *Lives*, 541; Tacitus, *Annals*, 1:55; 12:43; *History*, 513; Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*: Claudius, 46; Vespasian, 25; Domitian, 23.

⁴³See Moses Hadas's point on this explicit issue of Tacitus's textual embellishments, where he concludes that, in terms of ancient methods, "Tacitus never consciously sacrifices historical truth," calling him Rome's "greatest historian." See Hadas's introduction to *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, in *The Modern Library*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Random House, 1942), xvii-xviii, ix, respectively. Translator Robert Graves remarks similarly that it is possible to allow for Suetonius's extravagances and still conclude that he is "trustworthy." See Graves's foreword to *Twelve Caesars*, 7.

⁴⁴On both subjects, two helpful collections of essays are Richard Swinburne, ed., *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); R. Douglas and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1997).

⁴⁵Marcus Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), 67-71. For some detailed textual evidence, see the massive text by Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1999).

- ⁴⁶Some of the following material, with far less detail, is contained in my chapter "The New Testament," in *Why Believe? God Exists!* ed. Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas (Joplin, MO.: College Press, 1993), chap. 25.
- ⁴⁷Plutarch, *Lives*, 540-41.
- ⁴⁸Grant, *Jesus*, 182.
- ⁴⁹Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 189. This does not mean that the Gospels and Acts are precisely the same literary genre as ancient biographies and histories, only that some of the same standards should be applied.
- ⁵⁰Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, trans. D. Spillan (London: Bell and Daldy, 1872), book 1:1-3.
- ⁵¹Even the table of contents of Plutarch's *Lives* illustrates this point quite well.
- ⁵²Two helpful works here are Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992); and Gleason L. Archer Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).
- ⁵³Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 187.
- ⁵⁴Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, 180.
- ⁵⁵Grant, *Jesus*, 181-82; Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, 179-80, 189, 196-98.
- ⁵⁶Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 189. Details of his claims are provided especially in chapters 3-5. See also the exhaustive work by classical scholar Cohn Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisensbrauns, 1990).
- ⁵⁷Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 189-91; Grant, *Jesus*, 182.
- ⁵⁸For more details concerning these critiques, see Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 186-93; Grant, *Jesus*, esp. 180-84, 199-200.
- ⁵⁹Details are found in A. M. Hunter, *Jesus-Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 39-41.
- ⁶⁰See France, *Evidence for Jesus*, 124.
- ⁶¹Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus.
- ⁶²N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 8. Cf. similar comments by Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1998), who extends the core group of critically recognized Pauline writings to 1 Thessalonians and Philemon (109-10), and Wenham, who also includes 1 Thessalonians when referring to "the overwhelming majority of scholars" (*Christ and the Bible*, 24; cf. 13).
- ⁶³Koester, *History and Literature*, 52.
- ⁶⁴G.A. Wells, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1988), 19-22.
- ⁶⁵Although this could well refer to the incarnation rather than to Jesus' social condition.
- ⁶⁶For a recent, detailed discussion, see David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3-7, 338-72, 380-92. For other lists, see Barnett, *Is The New Testament Reliable?* 131-36; Amedee Brunot, "The Gospel before the Gospels," in *The Sources for the Life of Christ*, ed. Henri Daniel-Rops, trans. P.J. Hepburne-Scott (New York: Hawthorn, 1962), 110-14; Habermas, *Historical Jesus*, 32-33.
- ⁶⁷One of the distinctives of Wenham's treatment of Paul is not only attempting to study the "Jesus traditions" found in this apostle's writings but to challenge those who are less positive about such a move (Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 18-19).
- ⁶⁸C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 31. Note here that Dodd is arguing from the primitive speeches in Acts (see below) rather than from the book as a whole.
- ⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 26. For Dodd's entire argument, see 16-31.
- ⁷⁰Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 91-102, 133, 164. The quoted words appear on pages 91 and 94, respectively.
- ⁷¹Lightfoot's above edition of *The Apostolic Fathers* highlights citations of Scripture portions. For the actual figures provided here, I am indebted to an unpublished essay by one of my former graduate students, Kevin Smith ("References to Paul by Ignatius, Polycarp, and Clement," 30 April 1992).
- ⁷²Wells, *Historical Evidence for Jesus*, 21.
- ⁷³Guthrie argues for 53-57, with 57 the preferred date of most scholars (*New Testament Introduction*, 457-59); Koester places it at 52-55 (*History and Literature*, 103-4).

⁷⁴For our purposes here, it is not an issue whether 1 or 2 Corinthians contains parts of other letters written by Paul to this church (cf. Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, 313-14).

⁷⁵Witherington, *Paul Quest*, 230-31.

⁷⁶The classic study on this topic is Oscar Cullmann's *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: Lutterworth, 1949). Other major critical studies include Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (London: SCM Press, 1966); Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*. For additional details, see Habermas, *Historical Jesus*, 143-57.

⁷⁷Perhaps the clearest listing of what follows in the next paragraph is provided by Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Marsh (London: SCM Press, 1955), 338-39. See also Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 6-10.

⁷⁸See especially 1 Cor. 11:2,23; 15:3; cf. 2 Thess. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 1:9.

⁷⁹Examples that fit one or more of these patterns include Luke 24:34; Rom. 1:3-4; 10:9; 1 Cor. 16:22b; 2 Cor. 5:21; 8:9; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; Rev. 1:4; cf. Mark 7:3. Further, the early apostolic preaching in Acts (2:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 13:16-41) presents several examples of concise phrases that contain brief snippets of theology.

⁸⁰Some of the creedal material that summarizes these beliefs are Luke 24:34; Acts 2:22-24, 30-32; 3:13-15; 4:10-12; 5:29-32; 10:39-41; 13:37-39; Rom. 1:3-4; 4:25; 10:9; 1 Cor. 11:23ff.; 15:3-8; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 2:6; 3:16; 6:13; 2 Tim. 2:8; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 4:2.

⁸¹For a discussion of this data, see Habermas, *Historical Jesus*, chap. 7.

Excerpted from *Why I Am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why They Believe*, copyright 2001, Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, editors. Used by permission of Baker Books, a division of Baker Book House Company, copyright © 2001. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.
www.bakerbooks.com